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Subject: The Glasgow climate change summit explained

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The Glasgow climate change summit explained

BY ZIA WEISE | 10/31/2021 12:14 PM EDT

BRUSSELS — A crucial climate change summit, known as COP26, is about to kick off in Glasgow.

It's been described as the most important gathering since the 2015 Paris climate conference, with U.K. Prime Minister [Boris Johnson going as far as to cast this year's summit](#) as a "turning point for humanity."

No Paris-style blockbuster accord, however, is set to come out of Glasgow. So what's going on at this COP, and what would success — or failure — look like? Here's what you need to know.

What is the COP and what's happening in Glasgow?

The 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change compels its 197 members to fight global warming but doesn't offer much in terms of detail, so the signatories meet regularly to work on steps for implementing the treaty's aims.

This meeting is known as the COP, or conference of the parties. A COP summit has taken place nearly every year since 1995, hosted by a different country each time.

The upcoming COP — delayed by a year because of the coronavirus pandemic — is the 26th such summit, and will be hosted by the U.K. government in Glasgow between Oct. 31 and Nov. 12.

Some 25,000 people are expected to travel to Glasgow, including representatives from governments, civil society and industry. More than 100 world leaders will attend, though they won't stay the full two weeks.

What's the key goal of the summit?

The U.K. government has distilled its top target into one snazzy phrase: “Keeping 1.5 alive.”

Under the Paris Agreement, the result of COP21, governments agreed to limit the increase in global average temperature to “well below” 2 degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels — and better yet, 1.5 C.

Countries' climate action plans aren't sufficient to meet this goal, so the U.K. hosts want governments to put forward more ambitious pledges, both for reducing emissions during this decade and for reaching “net zero” by mid-century — a state where all emissions produced are offset by emissions removed from the atmosphere by around 2050.

Is 1.5 really that significant?

The U.K.'s insistence on 1.5 C is setting the stage for a battle over definitions, with some countries arguing the Paris deal allows for 2 C. It doesn't sound like a big difference, but every tenth of a degree of warming has major consequences.

1.5 C would still bring major changes, such as rising sea levels, biodiversity loss and more frequent droughts or flooding. But according to the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, composed of the world's top climate scientists, 1.5 C is considerably safer than 2 C. Extreme weather becomes more frequent the warmer it gets: Warming of 1.5 C will expose about 14 percent of the world's population to deadly heatwaves every five years, for example, while it's 37 percent at 2 C.

How are things looking so far?

Not great. Countries had to submit climate action plans to the U.N. as part of the Paris Agreement, known as nationally determined contributions. They were supposed to send in updated pledges ahead of COP26, but only 116 signatories have done so.

The U.N. recently warned current NDCs, including updated ones, have the world heading toward 2.7 C of warming. But a recent IPCC report found 1.5 C remains technically possible if governments take rapid and far-reaching action to reduce emissions.

Who's going to pay for all this?

Answering this question will be key to the talks' success.

The massive decarbonization needed to limit warming to safe levels will require equally massive investments, especially in the developing world. The International Energy Agency, for example, said this month that investment in clean energy needs to triple by 2030 to achieve net zero by mid-century, largely in developing and emerging economies.

It's a tall order for poorer countries. That's why in 2009, wealthy nations pledged to raise \$100 billion a year by 2020 to help developing countries reduce emissions and

adapt to the consequences of climate change. They're falling short: In 2019, the most recent data available, less than \$80 billion was raised, and a report by Canada and Germany this week found the goal won't be met until 2023.

Developing countries have stressed that keeping the climate finance promise is key to getting their support for more ambitious goals, putting pressure on rich countries to step up funding.

What other announcements are worth looking out for?

Johnson likes to talk about “coal, cash, cars and trees” as the areas the U.K. wants to see governments make commitments on.

For cash, see above. The other three refer to phasing out coal, speeding up the transition to electric vehicles in an effort to end combustion engine cars, halting deforestation and planting more trees.

There's already been some movement: China recently pledged to end support for overseas coal plants, but keep an eye out for more on that. A coal phaseout will also be discussed at the G-20 leaders' summit the weekend before COP26, setting it up for a triumphant (or disappointing) start.

Methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, has come into the spotlight, with the European Union and the United States leading a campaign to get countries to cut methane emissions by 30 percent this decade. Brussels and Washington want a majority of the world's governments to sign up to the pledge, which will be officially launched at COP26.

Adaptation to the impacts of climate change will be another focus at the summit. The U.K. is hoping to see action on adaptation finance and planning as well as the restoration of ecosystems. All countries, the U.K. says, should present a summary of their adaptation plans.

OK, but what's actually going to be decided?

Countries will need to finalize details of the Paris Agreement, so a significant part of COP26 will involve technical negotiations on the so-called Paris rulebook.

There are three key issues yet to be resolved: the “Enhanced Transparency Framework,” or rules on how countries report progress on their climate action plans; the “common time frames,” or how tight deadlines for climate goals should be; and parts of the agreement's Article 6, which deals with rules for carbon markets.

The latter will likely be the trickiest. The central idea is that countries unable to meet their climate targets can buy carbon credits (meaning emissions reductions) from other countries that have overshoot their goals. The overachiever gets money and the buyer can balance their emissions sheet — it's a win-win. But shoddy regulation could create loopholes that risk undermining emission reductions efforts, so getting the rules right matters.

Which countries will play a key role?

Many eyes will be on China. President Xi Jinping's announcement on ending overseas coal funding made headlines, but Beijing's current pledges, which include a climate neutrality goal for 2060, are regarded as insufficient. Xi is not expected to be in Glasgow.

Other major emitters that have so far rejected calls for more ambitious climate targets for the 2020s include Russia, Brazil and Australia. India, which relies on coal for 70 percent of its electricity generation, will also find itself in the spotlight.

The G-20 nations — together responsible for some 80 percent of global emissions — are all facing calls to step up their pledges.

And finally ... isn't this a massive superspreader event?

COP26 was postponed from November 2020 because of the pandemic. Even though the coronavirus crisis is far from over, the U.K. decided to go ahead with the talks in person this year given the importance of face-to-face negotiations. The pandemic will nevertheless have an impact, with concerns developing countries won't be able to fully participate.

The U.K. has relaxed its entry rules ahead of COP26, recognizing all vaccines and offering jabs to delegates. Vaccinated attendees from red zone countries still have to quarantine for five days, and unvaccinated attendees for 10 days. For all attendees, the U.K. says a "robust testing protocol" will be in place, including daily tests to enter the conference venue.

"Despite all these precautions there are likely to be cases of COVID," wrote Richard Smith, chair of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, in a blog post for the British Medical Journal. Delegates from developing economies, where vaccination rates are lower, "are potentially at most risk of both catching and spreading COVID," he added. "But it is people from these countries who are also most at risk from climate change."

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